

DEDANS, DEHORS ET À TRAVERS :  
PERSPECTIVES LITTÉRAIRES  
ET COMPARATISTES SUR LE SEUIL

In, Out and Through:  
Literary and Comparative  
Perspectives On Thresholds

Sous la direction de Jacopo MASI, Rui Carlos FONSECA,  
Patrícia LOURENÇO et Bruno HENRIQUES



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## INTRODUCTION

### THRESHOLDS: A MANIFOLD SPACE

In 2018, within the framework of a long-standing and fruitful collaboration between the Centre for Classical Studies and the Centre for Comparative Studies of the University of Lisbon, we organized an international conference on the topic of “thresholds in literature and the arts”. The call for papers for this volume followed a few months later. The essays that the reader finds here represent a fraction of the proposals we received, selected through double-blind peer reviews.

What triggered this double initiative – the conference and the volume – was the desire to explore the density and breadth of the notion of the threshold by addressing it from different perspectives, bringing together researchers from different areas – areas of research but also geographical areas – and with different methodologies. Undoubtedly we were also lured, at least at the beginning, by the naive hope – an unavowed wishful thinking, if you prefer – of working out a clear-cut definition of what a threshold is. And yet, we were also, or quickly became, aware that the question “what is a threshold?” is far more complex and difficult to answer than it may seem.

A couple of decades ago, Étienne Balibar had already pointed out the same problem concerning the definition of “border”, a notion closely connected to our topic by opposition, complementarity and partial overlap, as many of the essays collected here clearly show<sup>1</sup>. No simple answer to

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<sup>1</sup> The relationship between the two notions is alluded to or discussed in too many essays of our volume to list here. I rather call the reader’s attention to a peculiar and extreme example of this connection: the three essays here grouped under the section “Margin(alitie)s”, and particularly Voke’s pages on female exile poetry, address a very similar issue to the one emphasized by the words of André Green that Balibar’s essay “What Is a Border?” bears as an epigraph: “You can be a citizen or you can be stateless, but it is difficult to imagine *being* a border” (“On peut être citoyen ou apatriote, mais il est difficile d’imaginer qu’on *est* une frontière”).

Balibar's question "what is a border?" is possible, the essence of the idea varying both in space and time, changing according to the cultural and political context, and even to collective and individual experiences (Balibar 2002a, 75). As far as our "threshold" is concerned, if the geopolitical connotations play a less pre-eminent role in the instability of the notion<sup>2</sup> – or if they are not the first that come to mind when one is trying to delineate its essence, since we tend rather to associate it with architectural organizations of space – from a conceptual standpoint, a threshold is at least as complex and dialectical as a border. Indeed, the question "what is a threshold?" implies a wide range of other questions that, when addressed, immediately reveal the scope and fluidity of the topic, and even its ambiguities. To borrow Balibar's words (2002a, 75-76), the threshold is one of those apparently obvious notions whose false simplicity we need to overturn if we are to understand the unstable world in which we live.

The essays collected in this volume, with the variety of approaches, subjects and interpretations they provide, raise these implicit questions and account for the polysemy and polymorphism of the notion of the threshold and its manifestations. Within this diversity, a dense pattern of thematic and interpretative threads links each essay to several others. Among the multiplicity of possible criteria we could have followed to group the essays into smaller or larger sections – for instance, on a chronological basis or by discipline or field of research – we opted for a critical one that highlights these convergences in the interpretation of the notion of the threshold around some main features and associations. Our ordering and the following introductory pages, where I suggest further transversal links between essays in different sections, are therefore intended as a partial and arbitrary map to the several paths the reader could take to explore this rich collection and the complexity of the subject.

## 1. *LIMES / LIMEN*

The first group of essays addresses the crucial question of the ambiguous relation between the notion of the "threshold" and the kindred concepts "boundary", "border" and "limit". In his notes on the Parisian *passages*, Walter Benjamin observed that "[t]he threshold must be carefully distinguished from the boundary" (1990, 494 [O 2a, 1]). We may then ask ourselves to what extent the two notions diverge and to what

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<sup>2</sup> The geopolitical dimension of the threshold is nonetheless crucial in the three essays that open this volume.

extent they converge. Are some borders potential thresholds and vice versa? Maybe all of them? And, if so, what conditions are necessary for this potential to be realized?

Concepts (and notions<sup>3</sup>) and words are not one and the same thing; nonetheless, the first cannot be discussed but through the second. This is true not only when we deal with verbal texts (i.e. when we look for concepts in the words of others), but also, in general, in any act of criticism, be it literary or art criticism, as we put into words what others have expressed through other media. A painter can, of course, explore a concept bypassing its linguistic manifestation, but as soon as two viewers start discussing the use, or the presence – or even the absence – of that concept in the painting, they are obliged to make use of words. It is therefore usually advisable, when entering the hazy and slippery domains of concepts, abstractions, generalizations and metaphors, to start by inspecting the solidity of our verbal tools and how firm our grip on them actually is.

Alessandro Zironi's chapter "Thresholds in Medieval Germanic Languages and Literatures" opens this volume precisely by guiding us through a lexical journey that casts light on a variety of terms that different Indo-European languages have used, or still use, to indicate the threshold. Moving from Sanskrit and ancient Greek to Latin and modern Romance languages and paying particular attention to ancient Germanic languages, Zironi's research confirms, on a larger scale, the paradoxical nature of the threshold that Mircea Eliade identified in the relation between sacred and profane spaces<sup>4</sup>. Zironi's analysis of textual examples from medieval

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<sup>3</sup> The reader will certainly notice throughout these pages some oscillation between the use of the term "notion" and the use of the term "concept" in relation to our theme. Sartre put forward a sharp distinction between "concept" – a "définition en extériorité et [...] atemporelle" ("a definition in exteriority and [...] atemporal" – and "notion" – a "définition en intériorité [...], une pensée qui introduit le temps en elle" ("a definition in interiority [...], a thought introducing time into itself") (1976, 95). In the light of what Mircea Eliade writes in the foreword to his *Images and Symbols*, at least a third term could integrate this interpretative dyad: "image". Images, Eliade writes, "by their very structure are *multivalent*. If the mind makes use of images to grasp the ultimate reality of things, it is just because reality manifests itself in contradictory ways and therefore cannot be expressed in concepts" (1991, 15). The tight interweaving of these three terms is also evoked by Balibar at the beginning of his essay "The Borders of Europe" (2002b, 87). It seems to me that the material facet of the "threshold", its being grounded in the physical world, a feature pointed out by several essays in our volume, makes this interweaving even harder to disentangle.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Eliade (1987, 25): "The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds – and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible".